

# Don't let S.J. be railroaded into aerial structures

By Scott Knies

While several California cities are reviewing the option of running high-speed rail underground, the California High Speed Rail Authority wants San Jose to approve elevated tracks now and study no other options — a critical decision point for a mega-project that would drastically alter central San Jose.

If city staff had its way, San Jose would vote Tuesday to "eliminate from further study the tunnel alignment" and commit to a high-speed rail "aerial trackway" that could soar as high as nine stories above neighborhoods between Taylor Street and Tamien Station.

Thankfully, some of our elected

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leaders are still calling for further study of an underground option. Mayor Chuck Reed and council members Sam Liccardo and Pierluigi Oliverio have written the high-speed rail board twice to remind them of this. However, the full San Jose City Council has yet to weigh in. Maybe some overdue direction from the entire council will finally get the board's attention.

No one is demanding a tunnel be built in San Jose at this time. But the underground option must be analyzed in the rail project's environmental impact report before there are enough facts to make alignment decisions.

The city staff wants to jettison the tunnel option now and cut a deal with the authority to obtain funding and make the aerial structures look nice. The idea is to assure San Jose

veto power on the final design, an intriguing but unlikely scenario, given the precedent this would set for the authority in dealing with other cities.

San Jose should proceed on both fronts: study the tunnel and demand a binding agreement with high-speed rail on design issues. There is no advantage to San Jose capitulating on a tunnel this early in the process. While the High-Speed Rail Authority clearly views the tunnel as undesirable because of its cost, that is ultimately a political, not environmental, decision. Until more detailed study of the underground alignment is done, the true costs remain unknown.

The authority and city staff propose a gargantuan elevated structure that will redefine the skyline of San Jose. Do we really have enough

information to commit to the aerial alignment? This legacy project will impact generations.

Current reports trumpeting the aerial design and discrediting the tunnel come across as more opinion than fact. Such slanted analysis provides additional fodder to the project's critics warning of staff and consultant bias and to what some researchers have dubbed "strategic misrepresentation." The city report predicts downtown's development potential will be increased by the aerial structures! Who doesn't want to live under four rail tracks or next to speeding trains and towering trestles?

Our community experience tells us differently. Areas underneath and adjacent to transit infrastructure often are severely blighted, and in fact many cities have gone to ex-

traordinary measures to tear down elevated structures and reclaim them as civic spaces.

In arguing against the tunnel, city staff says the station box would be the length of the Empire State Building laid on its side — yet this same mass would be constructed high in the air near HP Pavilion under the aerial plan. Better use of urban land is one reason Los Angeles, Anaheim and San Francisco have underground tunnels in their high-speed rail plans, and so should San Jose.

From the start, San Jose has championed the high-speed rail project. But that does not mean San Jose will be railroaded into accepting incomplete work or making under-informed decisions for one of the most potentially important public projects in the city's history. We need to study the tunnel option.